

What is Marxist in Neo-Marxism?

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The two articles by Erik Olin Wright¹ that which I have the privilege to discuss are examples of social science at its best. They are intended to be, at the same time, contributions to a renewal of Marxism, which has been a project of a small group of West European and North American authors. The two articles complement each other nicely: the first, on class structure, is a substantive piece, where the author suggests a generalization of the notion of class structure, examines its conceptual and theoretical implications, and then tests it with quantitative data. The second, on methodological individualism, is a more explicit discussion on what should be understood by "Marxism" today, and whether it is or not compatible with a methodological individualist approach such as the one proposed by Jon Elster. What I will do in the following will be to examine the conceptualization of Marxism given in the second article, and see how it applies to the first, in an effort to understand what is still Marxism in neo-Marxism.

In the methodological paper, Wright and his co-authors start by dismissing the notion that there is a "irreconcilable methodological fissure" between Marxism and "bourgeois" social science, and side with those for whom "what is distinctive in Marxism is its substantive claims about this world, not its methodology, and that the methodological principles widely held to distinguish Marxism from its rivals are indefensible, if not incoherent" (he mentions Jon Elster, John Roemer, Adam Przeworski and G. A. Cohen). Dialectics, holism, materialism, historical perspective, anti-positivism, these and other claims of methodological distinctiveness are either simply rhetoric, incoherent, indefensible or shared, I may add, by other traditions.

¹ E. O. Wright, "A General Framework for the Analysis of Class Structure", *Politics & Society*, 13, 4 (1984):343-82; and Andrew Levine, Elliot Sober and Erik Olin Wright, "Marxism and Methodological Individualism", forthcoming, *New Left Review*.

The remaining of the methodological paper is a critique of "Marxian" methodological individualism. I am not very familiar with this literature, but the critique makes good sense to me. Basically the article distinguishes between methodological individualism and atomism, showing that the former puts the stress on individual interactions, not on individual monads; and also between holism (the notion that only aggregate entities are explanatory) and his own position, antireductionism, which accepts explanations at the macro and the micro level. The example given is the tendency for economic growth in capitalist societies; to be explained, it requires a general theory of competitive market relations at the macro level, which supervenes all concrete manifestations of economic survival and maximization at the micro level. The next theoretical step would be to see how this general condition is acted out by individuals in their daily life. For this we need to establish the micro-foundations of macro theories, not to be confused with individualism.

What escapes my understanding is why these questions are said to deal with "Marxian" methodological individualism, rather than with the question of methodological individualism *tout court*. The fact that the paper refers to a work by Elster, who tried to read Marx from this perspective², is obviously not enough. What are the substantive differences between this approach and that proposed, for instance, by authors like Randall Collins or Antony Giddens? There is no possible answer to this question in the methodological paper, and we must, therefore, move to the substantive one.

The central point of the Class Structure article is that societies are divided into classes not only because some people have more assets or power than others, but because there is exploitation, that is, some are better off because others are worse off. Inequalities in different assets imply different exploitation mechanisms, and different types of class structure. Inequality in labor power (when people are not free to sell their labor force) is related to coercive extraction of surplus labor, a society of lords and servants, and hence to feudalism (or slavery, which he does not discuss); inequalities in means of production leads to exploitation through market exchanges, a society of capitalists and workers, and hence capitalism; inequalities in organizational resources lead to a society of managers and non-managers, to exploitation through appropriations based on hierarchy, and hence to state bureaucratic socialism; inequalities in skills would lead to a society divided among experts and workers, exploitation based on expertise, and

² Making Sense of Marx, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

socialism. The generalization from one to four types of exploitation leads to the notion of "contradictory class locations" (a concept reminding the American studies on "status inconsistency" of twenty years ago) which should enable us to go beyond the traditional Marxist notion that societies are (or tend to be) polarized in just two classes; thus, feudalism entails the bourgeoisie, not only lords and servants; capitalism entails the managerial class, not only bourgeois and proletarians; and a new class of intelligentsia /experts would emerge from bureaucratic socialism.

It is easy to see that this ingenious framework goes beyond conventional Marxism, allowing for new interpretations of problems of social stratification in socialist societies, for the incorporation of matters such as bureaucratization, the mobilization of experts and the intelligentsia, and even for a glimpse into what may lie beyond modern capitalism and bureaucratic socialism: societies where only differences in individual skills would remain, their exploitation possibilities reduced and controlled by continuous negotiated redistribution between skilled and unskilled.

What is again not clear is whether we are still within something we can call "Marxism", or whether we are simply dealing with good social sciences. My main point is that, for Wright, what seems to be crucial in feudal and market exploitation is that they derive from sheer assets inequality, and are therefore purely "structural", or "materialist". However, even if we granted that this is so, we can still question his generalization of exploitation to include organizational resources and skills.

Wright's approach to organization starts with the notion of technical division of labor, which occurs within companies in capitalism and for the whole state in bureaucratic socialism. Power (and authority, and exploitation) are said to be a function of "coordinated decision-making over a complex technical division of labor". But if this were really so, a reduction of power concentration would mean a technical impoverishment of the economic organization, and in that case, the acid test for the existence of exploitation would fail, since everybody would lose if the organization were to be dismantled or decentralized³. The conclusion is that organization power and authority is not a simple outcome of a technical division of labor, but includes an independent element of domination that, in fact, is the one that leads to exploitation.

³ The test, in this case, would be that "nonmanagers would be better off and managers and bureaucrats worse off if nonmanagers were to withdraw with their per capita share of organization assets (or equivalently, if organizational control were democratized)" (p. 394). This would not happen if, with decentralization, productivity is reduced.

The same reasoning applies to the question of skills. Wright is aware that only when skills are scarce they can produce exploitation (differences in "skill assets" are not enough, as in the case of differences in capital or labor assets); and that certification, or credentialism, is one of the ways of creating this scarcity. The difficulty, however, is that credentials are only partially a function of skills; on the limit, as we are all aware, there can be certification with no skills, or in other words, purely status positions guaranteed by legal or some other kind of status privilege.

If this reasoning is correct, we are then back to domination as the central concept of social stratification and class relationships. If this were so, we could say that exploitation mechanisms based on unequal distribution of productive assets (labor, means of production, organization positions, skills) are just some, and perhaps not the most important sources of social inequality and conflict. And we would be freer to open up our eyes to a series of other modalities of social stratification and conflict - racial, religious, cultural, even geographic - which have usually remained outside the realm of Marxist analysis.

But why this insistence on exploitation through asset inequalities, rather than through domination and authority? Wright tells us that the exploitation-centered concept is more materialist than domination, and can lead to an analysis based on the understanding of "objective interests" of the different classes, which would provide the basis for the understanding of questions of class formation, class alliances and class struggle.

This is then what seems to be a neo-Marxist nowadays: to be "materialist", that is, concerned with "objective interests". To ask, on one hand, how these interests depend on the broad features of economic systems; and, on the other, how they help to explain the behavior of individuals and organized social groups. But this is not a peculiarly Marxist notion, except perhaps in a historical sense. Most social scientists would agree today that "objective interests", if they can be identified at all, can be good heuristic devices to understand social phenomena; they would also agree that the notion of "interest" has to be expanded beyond "material" interests (meaning those related with economic survival or monetary gains, or those that can be "structurally" defined), and that the relative weight of some kinds of "interests" over others is an open empirical question.

I would conclude by saying that, as far as I can see, Wright's claim for a substantive distinctiveness for Marxism does not seem to hold. In a sense, if we think on Marx as one of the founders of modern social thought, we are all Marxists. But militant Marxists have usually remained close to specific political parties and social movements, trying to make the product of

their work directly relevant for their social and political practice. The difficult coexistence of this double role explains, I believe, the emergence in the West of a new group of intellectuals concerned with some of the classic Marxist problems, but incorporating whatever they found meaningful in the Western sociological tradition, and discharging the dead weight. In that sense, we are all ex-Marxists. To be a self-proclaimed Marxist in the world of social sciences today is less a question of preferring that or another subject for analysis, or a given methodology, than an effort to take a stand - to develop a distinctive "discourse" - within his own academic community and society. Which stand it is, and which are its consequences, will certainly differ if you live in Sweden, the United States, France, Brazil or the Soviet Union. The answer to this question is certainly not in either of these two excellent papers I have the privilege to comment today.